



**Secure Families Initiative**

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STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

**HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

117th Congress  
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“Helping Veterans Thrive:  
The Importance of Peer Support in  
Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism”

## **Secure Families Initiative (SFI)**

Secure Families Initiative (SFI) is a nonpartisan 501(c)(4) nonprofit that trains and mobilizes military families to be voters and advocates on issues that impact them and their communities. We especially encourage military family members to get involved in issues related to foreign policy and national security, as military families know better than most the consequences that wars abroad have here at home.

SFI regularly partners with its sister organization, Secure Families Foundation (SFF): a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit that educates military families and civilian supporters on the ways in which foreign policy impacts the military community.

Neither organization receives funding from the U.S. government or any foreign entity.

## **Sarah Streyder, MPP**

Sarah Streyder is an advocate, organizer, and proud military spouse who is committed to helping other military partners and family members raise their voices on policies that affect their lives – especially on national security issues. In 2020 she founded the Secure Families Initiative, and she continues to lead the organization as its Executive Director today. Under Sarah's leadership, SFI has grown to represent tens of thousands of members stationed around the world. She has appeared on CNN, Fox News, CBS, and the New York Times to share military family perspectives on current events.

Sarah began her career working for the White House's correspondence office. She later joined the Department of Commerce's legislative affairs team, where she helped coordinate administration-wide strategy on trade policy. In 2017, Sarah moved to join her then-Air Force (now Space Force) spouse stationed in Nebraska, where she spearheaded outreach efforts for the education nonprofit Stand For Schools, expanding the organization's budget and network of partnerships. In 2018, Sarah organized a new, nonpartisan coalition of diverse stakeholders in North Omaha to register and turn out voters from historically underrepresented communities.

Sarah now lives in Virginia and was recognized as the 2022 Armed Forces Insurance Space Force Spouse of the Year. She also has a Master's in Public Policy from Cambridge University, with a focus on international human rights.

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and Members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee – thank you for inviting the Secure Families Initiative (SFI) to submit testimony on supporting veterans and preventing violent extremism.

The topic of today's hearing has profound importance for our military and veteran community. When a service member or veteran adopts extremist views and resorts to political violence, it is us – their immediate loved ones – who are impacted first. Our safety is put at risk; our lives are turned upside-down; our dearest people we stand to lose. We deeply appreciate this committee including our voices in these deliberations, as no one is more personally invested in identifying solutions to this real and pressing problem than we are.

### **Key Points:**

- *The wartime operational tempo of the last twenty years has contributed to disillusionment.* Understanding this context is crucial to understanding risk factors related to political violence.
- *Veterans' interpersonal support networks are the first line of defense against violent extremism.* The partners, family members, and neighbors of veterans are uniquely influential stakeholders who must be incorporated into any prevention or rehabilitation strategies this Committee devises.
- *Voting and other forms of civic engagement provide peaceful alternatives to political violence.* This Committee should support efforts that train and inspire veterans to exercise their rights.
- *SFI stands ready to partner on this issue.* Our work and the work of other non-governmental partners should continue to inform this Committee's strategies.

### **Operational Tempo Increases Certain Risk Factors**

While U.S. foreign policy is not the jurisdiction of this Committee, SFI strongly encourages Members to reflect on how the wartime operational tempo of the last 20 years has contributed to the problem we are tackling today in order to more effectively structure solutions.

Many in this generation of veterans struggle with mixed emotions regarding the impact their military service had on the world, as well as its effects on their health and wellbeing (and that of their families). The conflicts that many veterans were sent to fight in were plagued by unclear and unmet goals. While public support of service members, veterans, and their families has remained high, a stark disconnect often emerged between how "progress" in war was communicated to the public back home, and how war felt to those on the ground.

Moreover, the last 20 years of overseas conflicts came at a high cost for military families. [Over 6,718 U.S. service members have been killed in Afghanistan and Iraq.](#) 1,645 experienced major limb amputations, and 328,000 suffered traumatic brain injuries between 2001 and 2015. These

statistics only begin to scratch the surface on the number of American lives that have been permanently altered by these wars.

Yet this country's discourse over war rarely acknowledges this high cost, and many veterans and their family members feel afraid to speak up for fear of having their patriotism questioned. Discouraging stakeholders from weighing in on decisions that directly impact them is a recipe for discontentment.

Veterans and their families deserve to be treated with honesty and respect. This includes a frank acknowledgement of the cost these wars continue to have on this community.

Key takeaway: *Understanding the legacy of wartime service is essential for veteran-serving institutions wanting to communicate effectively with their veteran clients.* Extremist groups are highly skilled at taking a veteran's justified grievances and inflaming them into calls to violence. Both government and society can disrupt this radicalization formula by listening empathetically when veterans share their experiences, accepting responsibility for the role we played in those policy decisions, and offering a supportive community.

Additionally, foreign policy makers who are outside this room must take note of how repeated conflicts without clear goals or adequate service support systems are breeding grounds for disillusionment and distrust among those who lose the most in these fights. As Congress weighs decisions over war and peace, Members must consider the full impact these choices will have on the people sent on these missions and the loved ones they leave behind.

### **Include Veterans Partners and Family Members**

When a veteran becomes radicalized toward political violence, the first people in the line of fire are their immediate loved ones. Through the course of our work, SFI has heard from partners, parents, and children whose lives radically changed when a veteran in their life embraced an extremist ideology.

Family members' proximity to veterans also makes them the first line of defense against radicalization. The interpersonal connections that partners, families, and neighbors have can complement formal, official channels of information and support.

This point is best understood through example. We heard from a military spouse who received a recruitment attempt from an extremist group on social media. Within minutes of her engaging with a Facebook post about a funny T-shirt slogan (not realizing the context behind the joke), a recruiter sent her a direct message asking if she wanted to meet and join their group. In other words, this extremist group used humorous, innocuous-seeming content to attract attention from military-connected individuals and pull them toward a sophisticated engagement ladder.

It is crucial for veterans and their loved ones to understand how digital recruitment works so they can detect efforts early. This goal could be partially accomplished through social media

literacy trainings during a member's time in service, then again during their transition out of service.

However, top-down approaches will only accomplish so much – any service member, veteran, or family member will tell you that official, mandatory trainings often have mixed degrees of impact at best. In fact, for some veterans who already have anti-government leanings, these strategies may even fan those flames.

That is why informal, peer-to-peer approaches are crucial to invest in as well. Those of us who are already within a veteran's informal sphere of influence are much more likely to succeed at recognizing when our loved one is considering violence and encouraging them otherwise.

Key takeaway: *Train the willing to engage the unwilling.* Equip veteran partners and family members with the tools they need to identify early risk factors and support loved ones in pivoting toward a non-violent direction.

### **Encourage Voting and Civic Engagement**

People are more likely to take on extreme tactics when they do not feel they have any other path available to them. Because the military lifestyle can impose unique limitations on a service member's ability to vote and participate in our democratic system in other ways, it is tragically unsurprising when a veteran emerges from their time in service feeling confused about how to address concerns or resolve problems through civic engagement, discouraged about being an outsider in a new community, and thus open to less peaceful alternatives.

According to the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), in 2020 there was a [27% lower voter participation rate among military voters](#) compared to their civilian counterparts. Much of this deficit can be traced back to the unique obstacles that military voters face when trying to cast their ballots – international mail delivery delays and complicated residency questions are two common examples.

These challenges do not vanish when a service member leaves the military, either. Veterans with physical disabilities from their time in service can face accessibility barriers to both in-person and absentee voting methods. Even when voting is accessible, a veteran's motivation to participate may have already eroded from years of struggling to cast a ballot while serving.

Key takeaway: *Support voter outreach efforts.* This Committee should empower the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) to continue its existing efforts to expand voter registration information to their veterans. Members of this Committee should also share their insights regarding the challenges faced by military and veteran voters as Congress decides issues related to voting policy.

Beyond voting, other forms of civic engagement can also prove difficult for service members (and subsequently, veterans) to access. An active-duty lifestyle often entails frequent relocation for military families. It can be difficult for troops and their dependents to build close social and

political ties with their local communities when their assignment to an area may not last long. As a result, when a veteran leaves the service, they may feel detached from their civilian neighbors, unsure where and how to plug in with the social and political systems that can support them.

Additionally, there are important policy guardrails in place regarding troops and their ability to join in partisan activities during their time in the military. While the majority of these limits do not apply to a service member's partner or family, SFI has found many who still perceive social pressure to stay away from anything that feels "too political." As a result, when a veteran and their family members leave the service, the whole family unit may feel "behind the curve" regarding how to make their voices heard on issues they care about.

We all want veterans and their families to be able to fully exercise their First Amendment rights to free speech and petition the government. That is why it is important to clearly define the paths available to them during and after their military service, so they can peacefully participate in the democratic institutions they served to protect.

Key takeaway: Support civic education. This Committee should direct the VA to collaborate with the Department of Defense (DOD) by encouraging nonpartisan civic engagement to their clients and incorporating clear information regarding the rules into their training.

### **Learning from Non-Governmental Partners like SFI**

Preventing and reducing political violence among veterans will require a 360-degree approach where all affected parties work in tandem to tackle the problem. SFI is proud to be part of this team effort. Here is an overview of how our work contributes to inoculating veterans and families against political violence:

- *We defend and advance voting protections for military service members, veterans, and their families.* In 2020, SFI founded a nonpartisan [Military Vote Coalition](#) with 23 veteran and military family-serving nonprofits to educate policymakers and the broader public about the military voting experience. This widespread collaboration has and will continue to raise awareness about how voting policies can better account for the lived experiences of the military community.
- *We help military service members, veterans, and their families navigate voter registration and ballot-casting processes.* We communicate nonpartisan information about voting rules and procedures in approachable ways that complement official government channels. This year, we partnered with another military-serving nonprofit to build outreach materials specifically designed for military teens. Given current recruitment patterns, today's military kids are often tomorrow's service members and veterans, so we want to ensure they are plugged into voting from the beginning of their careers.

- *We train veterans and military family members on how to advocate for their communities within the limitations of military service.* Our nonpartisan civics curriculum helps clearly define all the ways in which military families and veterans are allowed to participate in advocacy without violating DOD restrictions. In doing so, we ensure that participants know how to exercise their First Amendment rights.
- *We also train veterans and military family members on how to engage their loved ones in tough conversations about topics like domestic violent extremism.* Having constructive conversations with people we love about topics we fundamentally disagree on is so important for American civic life to thrive – and especially valuable for engaging our loved ones who may be considering an extremist ideology. But these conversations require skill, practice, and motivation to try when it feels tempting to avoid. We train folks in our network about how to lean into these tricky situations constructively.

Our work has informed our testimony today. The Secure Families Initiative stands ready and eager to continue liaising with this Committee on solutions and best practices.

### **Closing**

SFI thanks this Committee for hosting this important hearing. The issue at hand is real and urgent. No one cares more about supporting our veterans than us, their immediate loved ones. For that reason, we thank you for inviting non-governmental entities like ours to partner with you on forging solutions toward preventing domestic violent extremism. We strongly encourage both this Committee and the VA to continue collaborating with stakeholder groups in the days ahead.